Unveiling Women's Leadership Status in the Corporate Realms in SADC states: Extracting Vital Lessons

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Abstract

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) is a Regional Economic Development inter-governmental organisation that comprises 16 Member States. The SADC protocol on Gender and Development is geared towards eliminating discrimination and achieving gender equality and equity through development and implementation of gender responsive legislation, policies, programs and projects. Aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, this protocol ambitiously aimed for 50% female representation in decision-making roles by 2015. A vision thwarted, as only four SADC nations reached the 30% mark, exposing a stark gender chasm in corporate leadership. This study investigates the status of women's leadership in the corporate realms such as private enterprises, state-owned entities, and parastatals across SADC states. This empirical analysis based on secondary data primarily the Gender and Development monitor (2022) and other reports that unveil an acute dearth of women in top positions across all the sectors. There are several challenges that women face – the impenetrable glass ceiling, sticky floors of gender bias, and the weight of domestic responsibilities borne disproportionately by women. The findings highlight a vivid picture of a struggle against patriarchal norms, prejudice, and safety concerns, highlighting the urgent need for extensive research in this vital domain. The lessons learnt from the SADC countries echo as a call to action, resonating globally, urging societies to dismantle barriers, fostering a world where gender is not a limitation but a source of strength.

Keywords: Women's leadership, SADC countries, Corporate Sector

1 Introduction

1.1 Gender Equality, Women Leadership, SADC Protocol

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) is a regional economic community comprising 16 Member States that are; Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. It envisions a shared future marked by regional prosperity, enhanced living standards, social justice, and peace. Founded on principles of economic collaboration, SADC fosters mutual cooperation among member states, pooling resources to fortify regional capacity in economic, social, and political domains. The SADC Heads of State and Government endorsed the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development in 2013. It was revised in 2016 the Protocol aims to empower women, eliminate discrimination, and achieve gender equality. The SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, subsequently revised in 2022, reaffirms member states' commitment to advancing gender equality and women's empowerment across various sectors. It is aligned with international commitments, such as the UNDP Gender Equality strategy for 2025 and the 2030 SDGs imperative of achieving gender equality and eliminating all forms of discrimination against women and girls. It has been endorsed by the SADC member states. It serves as a comprehensive regional instrument, bolstering the capacity to implement and monitor the SADC gender agenda effectively that underscores the pivotal role of women in leadership and their equal participation across institutions. This approach ensures both men and women contribute holistically to societal and economic progress. In, tandem, SADC Member States actively pursue gender parity in political and decision-making spheres, advocating for equal representation in cabinets, parliaments, councils, private companies, public services management, as CEOs, and on company boards. Countries like Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe demonstrate noteworthy progress, with over 30% women's representation in parliamentary houses. The creation of legislative quotas

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further fortifies this commitment (SADC, 2022b). This, study delves into the status of women's leadership within the corporate sector in the SADC context namely in private sector companies, state-owned enterprises, parastatals and boards. It uses the Gender and Development monitor (2022a) and other reports as the main tool for examining and addressing gender disparities in this domain. The SADC Gender and Development Monitor, 2022 tracks progress on the implementation of the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development

1.2 Women in leadership in the corporate sector in SADC- A contextual perspective

In recent decades, a surge in scholarly debates on women's inability to reach key decision-making positions has ignited a global dialogue on women in leadership, transcending disciplinary boundaries. This has contributed to discourses about the intricacies of gendered disparities, career progression, and pay differentials and the importance of analysing women's experiences in relation to power dynamics between men and women within work-contexts (Stead and Elliot, 2009; Gouws, 2008; Glass and Cook, 2015; Bauer and Burnet, 2013). However, these discourses have predominantly highlighted the experiences of privileged white men in western nations, underscoring the urgent need to amplify the voices of women in leadership, particularly in the African context and within the SADC states (Klenke, 2011; Trigg and Bernstein, 2016; Lituchy et al, 2017). Globally, the UN Women's staggering statistic reveals that women hold merely 28.2% of management positions worldwide, laying bare the persistent gender gap in the professional realm and this UN global estimate clearly resonates in SADC states (UN Women, 2023).

The historical backdrop of SADC further complicates this narrative, as political, economic, and social perspectives have traditionally marginalized women, hindering their access to positions of power and influence. The post-colonial legacy in SADC, marked by apartheid-like dual systems, perpetuated inequalities, denying indigenous populations and women opportunities for education, employment, and resource access. The arduous task of nation-building in the wake of colonialism necessitated addressing multifaceted challenges, from poverty, infrastructure, disease to discrimination against women (Mama 2008; SADC 2005; United Nations University, 2009). Economically, despite the region's abundance in precious minerals, SADC's agrarian economy, where women are mostly employed undermines the status of women, who, despite being primary providers, face wage disparities. Socially, the disproportionate impact of HIV on women persists, revealing persistent structural challenges. Infrastructure disparities across member states compound the problem, creating an uneven playing field for gender harmonization. Hierarchical and vertical marginalization further exacerbate women's under-representation, echoing a global phenomenon documented by (UNESCO, ILO, &SADC). In SADC, this dynamic unfolds across three dimensions – economics, power, and culture – manifesting in restricted access to resources, limited representation, and minimal control over opportunities that impact women largely (Gunawardena, et al., 2004). The persistence of cultural norms and attitudes emerge as formidable barriers to women's leadership in SADC countries, perpetuating the notion of women as subservient. Organizational cultures often subject women to harassment, confining them to specific roles and undervaluing their expertise. The absence of social connections and networks hampers women's progress, while domestic and childcare expectations create an additional hurdle, epitomizing the enduring "second shift" (Kiamba, 2009; Joshi, 2014; Joshi & Misangyi, 2018; Ferrant et al., 2014; Hochschild & Machung, 2012; Klettner et al., 2016). Despite these challenges, SADC remains steadfast in its commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment. In, post-apartheid South Africa a proliferation of policies and legislation was introduced to address racial and gender inequalities, notably the Employment Equity Act of 1998 (EEA) as well as various affirmative action (AA) programs. These laws were implemented to bring transformation in South Africa's corporate environment and redress the gender and racial imbalances of the past and drive economic development (Hlobo, 2019). The Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP) 2020-2030 recognizing gender as a pivotal enabler calls for balanced representation across all sectors, signaling a resolute push for effective equality in opportunities between men and women. As the global community grapples with the complexities of women in leadership, SADC's journey unfolds at the crossroads of history, culture, and a collective vision for a more equitable future. Nevertheless, despite efforts to promote gender equality, the representation of women in CEO positions and on boards of private companies, state-owned enterprises, and parastatals in SADC states remains dismally low. According to a report by the International Labour Organization (ILO), only 5.6% of CEOs in Southern Africa are women, highlighting a glaring gender gap in top corporate leadership roles (ILO, 2021). This statistic is indicative of the significant underrepresentation of women at the helm of private companies within the region. Moreover, the situation is even more concerning in state-owned enterprises and parastatals, where women's leadership presence is even scarcer. For instance, a study conducted by the Southern African Development Community Gender and Development Directorate revealed that women hold only 12% of board positions in state-owned enterprises across SADC member states, illustrating a persistent gender imbalance in governance structures (SADC Gender and

Development Directorate, 2019). This disparity underscores the entrenched barriers that hinder women's advancement to leadership positions in both the private and public sectors within the SADC region.

1.3 Method

Secondary data refer to data that are collected by someone other than the user or are used for an additional purpose than the original one. A wide range of sources can be used as secondary data: censuses, information collected by government departments, organizational records and data that were originally collected for other research purposes. Secondary data can answer two types of questions: descriptive and analytical. Hence, the information can be used to describe events or trends or it can be used to examine relationships among variables cross-sectionally or longitudinally (Pederson *et al.,* 2020). This, study employs secondary data as the main research tool. It has used the SADC Gender and Development Monitor 2022 on Women in Politics and Decision-making that was produced through the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting Framework (MERF). This tool was employed to collect data from Member States and the data was analysed and synthesized by the Southern African Research and Documentation Centre (SARDC) in collaboration with the SADC Gender Unit to assess progress by Member States on women's participation in politics and decision- making. The study will use the findings on women in the corporate sector, primarily in the Private Sector, State-Owned Enterprises & in Parastatals. It is also important to highlight that for some SADC countries data is not available or rather has not been provided. The findings here are based on the data submitted by the member states which is based on national reports that tracks progress on member states with regard to the gender protocol. The data highlights the findings from Private Sector Companies, State owned enterprises and parastatals in promoting the participation by women in leadership and decision-making.

1.4 Women in leadership in the private sector companies

The data was gleaned from the Gender and Development monitor 2022 that is an instrument tracker that assesses progress on gender equality in SADC. This data was shared on an overall basis by 7 states such as Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, South Africa and Tanzania out of the 16 SADC Member States from the private sector. The latest statistics unveil a sobering reality on the presence of women in the upper echelons of power. Seven out of the sixteen SADC Member States shared data on the representation of women as CEOs and board members in their top 5 private sector companies. Out, of a total of 92 CEO positions, women only constitute 9% of CEO positions. In, terms of board members women only occupy 24% of board positions. It reflects that there is a large gender disparity in leadership roles. In the majority of cases, women are still marginalized and outnumbered by men. The data highlights a stark truth that the average count of women holding the CEO title or securing board positions is distressingly low. The findings reveal that persistent gender disparity is deeply entrenched in the leadership fabric of these companies that echoes an uphill battle for gender equality.

1.5 Women in leadership in State-owned enterprises (SOE's)

State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) in SADC states are governed by legal instruments divided into two categories as per acts of Parliament establishing statutory corporations that are "Parastatals," and the Companies Act for corporatized entities or "State Enterprises" (Gender & Development, Monitor, p.90). Despite terminology variations, SOEs are government-created entities for commercial activities, wholly or partially owned. A parastatal entity refers to a corporate body established by parliamentary legislation and financed predominantly, if not entirely, by government funds sourced from taxation, grants, or loans, either domestically or from external public financial institutions. In the realm of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) within the Southern African Development Community (SADC). These figures assess women's representation in the top five SOEs in each SADC Member State. The figures unfold a narrative that is concerning. Women are significantly under-represented as CEOs of State-Owned Enterprises. Of the eight Member States that submitted data, only six women are CEOs out of 40 accounting for only 15 percent. Malawi submitted data for Directors in their top five SOEs and only 6 out of 30 are women. However, women are slightly better represented as Board Members, with South Africa having 52.1 percent of women representation, followed by Lesotho which has 47.9 percent and Eswatini 36.8 percent. Although representation is better for women as Board Members, the numbers are still significantly low as they represent only a mere 26 percent on average basis

1.6 Women in leadership in parastatals

Member States generally have higher statistics of women participation in parastatals than in SOEs. However, the readiness for inclusion of women in nonprofit spaces raises the question of women's access and power over resources, and therefore questions the level of commitment in that regard. As per the data submitted by Angola, Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Namibia, Seychelles and Zimbabwe. Angola has a 50 percent representation of women at the helm of two out of four named parastatals. Malawi has 12 women

CEO's out of 47. Thus, out of a total 82 CEO positions from the data available the percentage of women CEO's is 29%. In terms of board representation Lesotho, Namibia and Zimbabwe have 51.5%, 40.3% & 47.6%. Despite better representation of women. However, the general picture accentuated from the data is a narrative that women's active participation in the parastatals, the data shows limited access and control of resources that can be available in as compared to the corporate sector. As such board members are policy makers in any entity that determine the direction of socio-economic wellbeing. Having fewer women in those positions means their voices are already overshadowed, and by implication, gravitate towards exclusion.

1.7 Conclusions

In the corporate landscape of Southern African Development Community (SADC) states, women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership positions, particularly as CEOs and board members. Despite advancements in gender equality across various sectors, the glass ceiling phenomenon persists, impeding women's progression to the upper echelons of corporate power. Numerous factors contribute to this disparity, including entrenched patriarchal norms, cultural biases, limited access to education and resources, and systemic barriers within corporate structures. In many SADC countries, societal expectations often dictate traditional gender roles, relegating women to subordinate positions within organizations and perpetuating the stereotype that leadership is inherently masculine. Furthermore, discriminatory practices such as unequal pay, lack of mentorship opportunities, and gender-based harassment further deter women from pursuing and ascending to leadership roles in the corporate sphere (UN Women, 2020).The recent findings from the Gender and Development monitor 2022, highlight that women's leadership in the corporate sector in SADC is far from reality and the vision of women actively steering the ship in corporate realms, wielding influence over resources, seems a distant mirage. Boardrooms, where policy decisions that shape the socio-economic destiny of entities, tell a tale of fewer women in positions of power. Their voices, integral to diverse perspectives, risk being drowned out in a sea of male dominance, nudging them towards the periphery of decision-making. The findings are just not mere statistics, but about voices that demand to be heard and their perspectives that deserve a seat at the table. As the narrative unfolds, the urgency for a seismic shift in the corporate power dynamics becomes palpable where women not only participate but lead shaping the direction of corporate landscapes for the better. The Gender Equality monitor also highlighted other pertinent barriers that impede the progression of women into key decision making in the corporate sector in SADC countries. It reveals multifaceted challenges such as cultural and structural barriers such as social norms and stigma towards employed women, underscored by a lack of understanding of women's triple roles that creates a time-poverty paradox. The prevalence of prejudice, rooted in patriarchal attitudes and stereotypes, sidelines women, perpetuating biases that label them as emotional and weak. Sexual harassment, a silent obstacle, remains unquantified but looms large, potentially hindering women's effective participation. The harsh reality painted by the data underscores the persistence of gender inequality in the SADC region, impeding women's access to leadership roles. The journey towards parity demands a seismic shift, challenging societal norms, dismantling biases, and fostering an environment where women can thrive as leaders without fear or prejudice (Hampel-Milagrosa, 2011; Evans *et al.* 2014; Gouws 2010; ILO, 2022)

1.8 Recommendations

The findings of SADC Gender and Development monitor, 2022 thrusts us into a stark reality where the corporate sector's embrace of women in authoritative positions remains insufficient with the persistence of the glass ceiling in all the sectors investigated. The data from Member States acts as an urgent call to action, signaling a daunting gap between aspirations and tangible progress, leaving the 2030 SDGs vision of Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment hanging in the balance. This is not merely about numbers; it's a global imperative for collective commitment. Member states must synchronize their efforts, united by the shared goal of improving women's lives and leaving no one behind. Beyond numerical representation, the corporate sector—both public and private—must recognize that strategically placing women in decision-making roles is an empowerment tool resonating far beyond individual positions. The recommendations echo a resounding call for accountability and transparency. Gender audits, public reporting on gender mainstreaming progress, and the establishment of benchmark structures are vital steps. The measuring and reporting publicly on the progress of mainstreaming gender in private and public employment spaces is vital. Committing to instituting structures that can track performance in this regard across the Private sector, SOEs and Parastatals will also serve as motivational benchmarks for progress on gender equality actions and commitments; and ensure gender equality and opportunity at all levels within their own structures. There is need to wield influence through umbrella bodies, compelling companies to commit to gender equality and establish policies fostering safer, inclusive spaces for all. The solution lies in education and awareness such that regular gender-sensitive training, unique leadership modules at tertiary levels, and improved family support infrastructure are provided. To dismantle discriminatory attitudes, strengthen accountability, and enhance data collection, policies, strategies, and programs must be put in

place, facilitating equal participation in decision-making for women and men. The enforcement of quota systems emerges as a practical solution, addressing the need for equal opportunities in leadership roles. Mentoring and structured training programs for women stand out as pivotal tools to bridge the leadership gap. Women-only training platforms create spaces for engagement, networking, and skill sharpening. These programs, play a transformative role, not only in leadership pursuits but in empowering women to be politically active (Moor *et al.*, 2015). The path to true gender equality in SADC states is one of deliberate action, policy transformation, and unwavering commitment. The corporate sector's evolution toward inclusivity is a global imperative, and the time for change is now. The success of this endeavor should not be measured in statistics but in the transformative impact on the lives and futures of women in SADC and worldwide.

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